

To: Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement
Helena Dalli, European Commissioner for Equality

Cc: Genoveva Ruiz-Calavera, Director for Western Balkans, European Commission, DG NEAR
Colin Wolfe, Head of Unit, Western Balkans Regional Cooperation and Programmes, European Commission, DG NEAR
Liselotte Isaksson, Head of Sector, Civil Society and Social Inclusion, European Commission, DG NEAR
Olga Martin Gonzalez, Gender Equality Coordinator, Centre of Thematic Expertise Rule of Law/Fundamental Rights, Democracy, European Commission, DG NEAR

From: Regional Coalition for Gender Mainstreaming the EU Accession Process

Date: 9 April 2020

Subject: **Need for gender analysis to inform planning and realisation of EU support to Western Balkan countries in response to coronavirus pandemic**

Dear Commissioner Várhelyi,

Dear Commissioner Dalli,

Considering that gender equality is a fundamental value of the European Union (EU), specified in the [Treaty of Lisbon](#), and knowing that [EU Gender Action Plan II](#) and [The EU Strategic Approach](#) to Women, Peace and Security call for gender analysis, gender mainstreaming of programs and gender sensitive evaluation in EU external action financing, we, a regional coalition of 253 women's rights civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans (WB), seek your assistance in ensuring that the EU's support to the WB in response to the coronavirus pandemic considers the often differing needs of women and men.

On 30 March 2020, the [European Commission \(EC\)](#) announced that it will allocate €38 million in immediate funding to the WB to address pressing medical equipment and protection needs related to the coronavirus epidemic. The EC also announced a package of €374 million to support the social and economic recovery of the WB, including support to the private sector, increasing social protection, **with specific attention to vulnerable groups**, and strengthening the resilience of the public health sector. We commend and thank the EU for its support in our time of need.

At the same time, for both support measures, we ask that the EC makes obligatory *ex ante* gender impact assessments to inform the design of these actions. This needs to include consultations with women's rights organisations, as experts in this field, as well as recognition of their expertise. These steps would be in line with EC commitments to furthering gender equality; would fulfil commitments in the [EU Gender Action Plan II](#); and would contribute to 'ensure the delivery' of UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Based on gender assessment findings, we ask the EC to make obligatory the gender mainstreaming of all programs, as well as support 'stand-alone' programs for furthering gender equality, as the [European Institute for Gender Equality has shown evidence](#) that this 'dual approach' contributes to positive economic impacts. Towards implementation, the EC can issue guidelines for WB governments for gender mainstreaming and gender responsive budgeting of all EU and governmental

funds. Further, with EU funding, we hope you will strongly consider addressing the following priority needs:

- **Urgently** allocate emergency funding for shelters and other *autonomous, experienced* CSO service-providers (e.g., SOS hotlines) to ensure they have sufficient human and financial resources for functioning during the epidemic and supporting cases after the emergency phase.
- **Urgently** encourage governments to ensure functioning services related to protecting rights, including functioning aid distribution, labour inspections, submitting (online) applications to relevant institutions and registration for the applicable crisis measures offered by the governments for different vulnerable groups and individuals affected by the crisis, etc.
- **Urgently** encourage governments to ensure access to humanitarian aid packages, virus testing, and healthcare for women living in rural areas, minority women and women with different abilities who face added barriers in accessing assistance, particularly without public transport.
- In the short- to mid-term, ensure economic recovery programs include a gender perspective, particularly related to addressing the informal economy, women's unequal burden of unpaid care work and access to resources for business recovery and development.
- Allocate resources for CSOs to monitor and hold governments accountable to democratic practices and human rights commitments, considering that these may be undermined during the crisis, contributing to backsliding on prior progress.
- Plan funding for research and monitoring the situation from a gender perspective in the mid- to long-term including the differential impact of economic recovery policies on women and men. For such situations, identify opportunities for CSOs' improved access to urgent action funds that are very flexible and transferrable from year to year if not spent.

Experiences of nations that have undergone similar pandemics have shown that gender inequalities have prevailed among social inequalities. We are witnessing this trend within our own countries since the coronavirus outbreak. Domestic violence has increased amid social isolation measures, which also hinder women from accessing help, as institutions are not fully functioning; service-providers are overburdened and unable to meet the need for psychological counselling and support. Women tend to be overrepresented among persons working in essential service sectors and sectors affected by the pandemic, such as healthcare, hospitality, cleaning, textile production, food and medicine production and delivery, which places them at risk due to direct contact with people and insufficient protection measures (e.g. masks and gloves). Moreover, reports in the region exist of women in these sectors being forced to work overtime without pay, to sign *blanco* contracts that later can be ended without notice, and other labour rights violations. There are accounts of massive cancelling of contracts, termination of contracts by forced 'consensual agreement', and closing of businesses and factories. Pregnant women, among others, have had their contracts discontinued illegally. Social and economic vulnerabilities, coupled with the discontinuation of public transport, mean that women with disabilities, in rural areas, within minority ethnic communities and among the poor lack access to Coronavirus testing. Women generally have less access to funds for business development, and their small business may be particularly at risk in this situation. Thus, efforts are needed to assess the different impacts the crisis is having on women and men and to identify targeted actions to address these issues and inequalities.

In light of these developments, we call upon your action and support in ensuring a gender just approach is applied by the EC and implemented by WB governments, addressing the different needs and impact of the crisis for women and men, and contributing to decreasing inequalities in the region.

Among your WB partners, you will need partners with expertise related to gender equality. We offer our expertise and cooperation in supporting gender analysis and gender mainstreaming efforts. We hope that this letter can inform the drafting of the official decision/regulation on the allocation of EU funds to the WB. We hope to be your trusted partners in these efforts.

Thank you for your attention and response.

Sincerely,

Signatories:

Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN) (8 members) (Albania)

Association of Women Sandglass (Serbia)

Foundation "United Women" Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Helsniki Citizens' Assembly Banjaluka (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

HERA (North Macedonia)

National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (19 members) (North Macedonia)

Kosovar Gender Studies Center (Kosovo)

Kosovo Women's Network (161 members) (Kosovo)

Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

Mitrovica Women Association for Human Rights (Kosovo)

Reactor – Research in Action (North Macedonia)

Rights for All (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Roma center for women and children Daje (Serbia)

Women's Network BiH (55 members) (Bosnia and Herzegovina)